

STRANGER THAN FICTION

Show Business

I Guess I have more relatives in show business than Noah had animals in the Ark. Anyway there are at least two of our tribe in nearly every branch of the theater, and now that I am a Master Of Ceremonies the family must be one up on Noah's world famous zoo.

Naturally, with a background like mine, I've been somewhere near the footlights since I was a babe in arms. They tell me that I started as a contortionist; that when I was two months old, backstage people, from stage-hands to headliners, marveled at the ease with which I used my bág toes to scratch my toothless gums. And even after I had learned that there were places ^{to put my feet} ~~elsewhere~~ other than in my mouth, my feet continued to be very necessary to me. For at five I was dancing in a kid troupe.

When I was ten I changed my routine. One day I convinced a manager that I was a trombone virtuoso. He permitted me to use his stage to convince an audience. Very seriously I blew through one end of the instrument and was utterly surprised that the audience wasn't serious about what came out at the other end. The customers laughed so long and loud I wanted to pull the roof of the theater down on their heads --not knowing then that my trombone act was a hit as unadulterated comedy.

During the five years I traveled the country sending people into hysterics with my slip-horn, I often wondered whether or not that manage^r was dumb or smart.

But determined that people take me seriously as a musician I got a job in a dance band. For three years I drove the leader of this orchestra to the brink of insanity. He couldn't understand how one person could play off~~easy~~ so often. But he didn't fire me because I was his nephew. And when a motion picture company hired him to write music for its productions I inherited his baton.

When he left for Hollywood, I remember that he said to me: "My boy! The future of music will be safe if you just lead it. So here is my stick. Throw away that trombone of yours--forever!"

I was eighteen then. My band played in hotels, night-clubs and theaters. Occasionally, we did some radio work. From an orchestra leader it's just one step to a Master Of Ceremonies. And after I had waved the baton for two years, my agent told me about an offer he had, calling for my services as an "Emcee".

We were in Los Angeles. The job was with a unit-show, playing theaters straight across the continent from the coast to New York. My orchestra was of course included in the deal and all of us were glad to be working back toward Broadway. Beside my band, the unit had a twelve-girl chorus, a comedian, a troupe of acrobats, a pair of colored tap dancers and a torch-singer.

When we got to Chicago we dropped the girls because from there to New York we were playing in theaters which used their own choruses. We made a hit on Broadway and were held over for a second week. However, the acrobats quit the show at the end of the first week. Their contract called for just one week's work in New York and their routine had attracted such attention that they were offered immediate work in a London music hall.

Our second Broadway week began on a Friday. And it wasn't until I was leaving for the pit that I found out who was replacing the ac-

robats. The manager whispered to me: "We're using Jerry and Lovely, a pair of trapeze artist, instead of the acrobats. Know em?"

"Do I?" I answered. "They're the best in the business!"

"Well," he said, "they aren't here yet. But they're on their way right this minute. We can't wait though. Now you open with your regular overture. The girls will go through their dance routine. Then we'll put the comic on. Jerry and Lovely will follow him. This week's radio amateur contest winner will be next. And--"

"Save it!" I told him. "I know what to do!"

"But you got to ad lib with Jerry and Lovely!" He cried.

"Listen!" I've known Jerry and Lovely all of my life. They want comedy stuff. Well I'll toss 'em all the gags they can handle!"

Until we reached New York I had worked with the orchestra from the stage. But when we got to Broadway I discovered that "Emcees" were doing their stuff with their orchestras down in the pit, introducing the acts through a button-hole microphone. I like working from the stage best; you have a chance now and then to slip off to the wings; but when you're in the pit you work straight through the show without a break.

Well, this day I opened the show with a fast number; the girls came on with their formations; the comic followed them and got a lot of laughs. He did his stuff close up to the footlights. When he finished the curtain behind him went up on Jerry and Lovely.

I had never seen Lovely look more beautiful. She was dressed in white tights, her clear white skin glistened under the lights, and her black hair was held in place by a broad silver band. The routine began. During the early part of their act, Jerry and Lovely used just one swing--two pieces of wire and a rod--lowered from the top of the stage. And as they worked I tossed them gags.

Once, as Lovely hung by her toes from the trapeze, I said:
 "How about a date lady?"

And Lovely answered: "What will Jerry say? He's my husband you know!"

"Next time you're sitting on that rod up there in the sky," I told her, "and have hold of Jerry's heels--drop him on his head. Then we'll go out to dinner!"

That crack got a big hand from the audience because Jerry pretended to be terribly jealous.

Then came the high point in their act. Another swing was lowered from the top of the stage. Jerry climbed up to it; set it moving back and forth; then hung down with his head and arms pointing toward the boards. Lovely, all the while, was flying back and forth across the stage in her swing. She was preparing to catapult herself through the air, do a double somersault in mid-air, and complete the trick by having Jerry catch her hands.

I lifted my baton. The drums began a low grumble, rising to a rattling crescendo. Both swings were cutting a wide arc over the stage. I could see the smile on Lovely's face as the spotlights followed her pendulum-like motions. Jerry's face was a mask of confidence. They had done this same trick thousands of times.

In the first row behind me I heard a child ask a question of its parent. "Why dont they use a net like they do in the circus mama?"

The child's mother replied: "I've seen Jerry and Lovely do this before. They dont need a net dear!"

Suddenly Lovely let go the rod on the trapeze; She flew through the air like a projectile; Jerry braced himself to catch her. I saw her beautiful body spin twice. I saw her hands reach out--toward Jerry's hands. But their hands didn't meet!

I heard the crowd gasp. I heard a low moan break through Jerry's lips. Then Lovely's head struck the boards.

Every light in the house went out. When the lights went up, my orchestra was blaring out the music that brought on the radio amateur. He went to work like an old-timer--with a smile on his face and a song bursting from his lips.

But the crowd was wondering the same thing I was wondering. Was Lovely badly hurt?

Naturally, the other acts couldn't let an amateur teach them things about professional conduct in the face of emergency; the other acts went through their paces without a hitch, without a look toward the wings. The girls finished their last formation, the lights went down for the picture to come on. And then I was walking out of the pit, running up the iron stairs, speeding toward the wings. The backstage crowd parted and let me through to Jerry and Lovely.

Jerry looked up at me and said: "She's dead!"

I left the theater and took a walk. I walked up Broadway to Sixty-sixth Street where I stopped in a restaurant for a steak. When I got back to the theater, it was time to go down in the pit. Just as the "News Reel" was voicing its last item the stage manager poked his head through the little door under the stage.

"The ^{Two} ~~Three~~ Rollos are taking the Jerry and Lovely spot," he said. "They're--"

"Bicycle Riders Extraordinary," I told him. "I'll bring 'em on with a circus tune and run 'em off with SA Bicycle Built For Two"

"Swell!" He whispered. And just as I lifted my baton for the Overture, I heard him add: "That's show business!"